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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the need for teaching about the Vietnam War, possible reasons for the negligible treatment the subject receives in social studies classes, and some instructional approaches to the material. Currently, students lack a systematic and detailed knowledge of this turning point in U.S. history. The impact of the Vietnam War on U.S. foreign policy, domestic politics, and social history cannot be overestimated. The controversial nature of the War and its ensuing political opposition are reasons teachers shy away from this subject. They also are discouraged by the superficial and often distorted textbook coverage, time constraints, and a lack of worthwhile supplementary materials. Three aspects of the Vietnam conflict that should be covered in social studies instruction are identified. These are the conflict itself, the geographic concepts of places/regions and physical systems, and the gamut of homefront issues ranging from the anti-war demonstrations to the political ramifications of the War. To these ends, the digest lists several educational resource kits and theme issues of social studies journals. It also provides an address list of Southeast Asian resource centers and veterans' organizations that often publish resource packets and teaching materials. In addition, journal articles, annotated bibliographies, and teaching guides are noted. (MJP)

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Teaching about Vietnam and the Vietnam War

by Vickie J. Schlene

The Need. A high school senior recently told a reporter, "I keep hearing people say Central America is just like Vietnam. How am I supposed to know if Nicaragua is like Vietnam if I don't know what Vietnam is like?" Another student described his lack of knowledge of the Vietnam War and his fascination with it as the black hole of history. These responses reflect the widespread ignorance of students about a pivotal event in American history.

Our students were not born when the last helicopter lifted off the United States embassy rooftop in Saigon in 1975. Yet most of them have experienced myriad images, isolated facts, and emotional testimonials regarding Vietnam. But they lack systematic and detailed knowledge of a turning point in modern American history. If we want our students to understand many current foreign policy issues, they must be adequately informed about the war in Vietnam and how it has influenced our leaders and our culture. Given the importance of the Vietnam War in modern American history, it should be emphasized more than it is in the history curricula of schools.

Reasons for Neglect. Several factors have led to the brevity or absence of class time spent on teaching about Vietnam. These include (1) superficial and often distorted textbook coverage, (2) time constraints, (3) lack of worthy supplementary instructional materials, and (4) the controversial nature of a still-emotional era of United States history.

How and where should teachers include in the curriculum a decade-long conflict, spanning three presidencies? This problem continues to perplex educators. It took more than ten years after the last troops were withdrawn for teaching about Vietnam to be included in curricula of schools. Those teachers who took on this task found little, if any, scholarly supplementary instructional materials. Often, they were forced to write their own materials. The many controversies surrounding Vietnam made it a political hot-potato many instructors wanted to avoid. What can be done to improve teaching and learning about Vietnam and the Vietnam War?

Ways to Teach about Vietnam. There are three aspects of teaching about Vietnam that should be addressed. These are the conflict itself, the geographic concepts of places/regions and physical systems, and the gamut of homefront issues, ranging from anti-war demonstrations to the political ramifications of the war. In *The Vietnam War: Teaching Approaches and Resources*, Marc Jason Gilbert addresses teaching about Vietnam through the development of critical thinking skills. He proposes several models, including decision-making simulations and alternative exercises, opposing viewpoints, moot court proceedings, and media analyses (Gilbert 1991). In a chapter of Gilbert's book, Steve Potts promotes primary sources as an excellent way to teach about Vietnam. He uses four arguments: (1) primary sources can extend the textbooks' coverage and offer the beginnings of a thorough, balanced approach to the war; (2) primary documents are more intriguing than textbooks; (3)

primary sources expose the students to a wide range of opinions concerning the war; and (4) primary source materials force instructors and teachers to come to terms with their own subjectivity toward the war (Gilbert 1991, 193). It has also been said that by "letting the events and people of history speak for themselves, teachers can finally find a place for Vietnam in the curriculum" (Gilbert 1991, 196). Another way to capture the students' attention is to teach about Vietnam using popular literature and films. Using Vietnam conflict literature and films in the classroom can challenge students' preconceived perceptions of the war and help them to gain a more responsible view of American involvement in Indochina. This can only happen, however, if they are adequately prepared to utilize critical thinking skills to form knowledgeable opinions about the materials they read and view.

Organizations and Resources for Teaching about Vietnam and the Vietnam War. *The New York Times* Educational Media has produced *Live from the Past*, a series of instructional modules based on articles from the newspaper. A four-module set examines the origins, development, and consequences of the Vietnam War. To obtain information about the availability of these modules, call (800) 991-1112 or write to NYT Educational Media, 122 East 42nd Street, 14th Floor, New York, NY 10168. *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, a 1996 publication, includes original, signed articles dealing with many divergent aspects of the war.

Three social studies journals have devoted entire issues to teaching about the Vietnam War: (1) *Social Education*, January 1988, (2) *New England Journal of History*, Spring 1990, and (3) *The Social Studies*, January/February 1995.

Active Southeast Asia Resource Centers are located at several universities. Many of these centers produce instructional materials on teaching about Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. In addition, many organizations provide information on teaching about Vietnam. Here is a partial list of these organizations.

Indochina Institute
George Mason University
4400 University Drive
Fairfax, VA 22040-4449

Center for Southeast Asian Studies
University of Wisconsin, Madison
4115 Helen C. White Bldg.
600 N. Park Street
Madison, WI 53706

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Center for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict
Texas Tech University, Box 4529
Lubbock, TX 79409-1013

Center for Southeast Asian Studies
University of Hawaii at Manoa
416 Moore Hall, 1890 East-West Road
Honolulu, HI 96822-2383

Association for Asian Studies, Inc.
University of Michigan
1 Lane Hall
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Center for International Studies
University of Missouri-St. Louis
8001 Natural Bridge Road
St. Louis, MO 63121-4499

Center for Social Studies Education
3857 Willow Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15234

Southeast Asia Program
Cornell University
180 Uris Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853-7601

Institute of East Asian Studies
University of California-Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720

Asia Society, Inc.
725 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10021

Vietnam Veterans of America
2001 S Street NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20009

National Vietnam Veterans Coalition
P.O. Box 9504
Washington, DC 20016

Vietnam Veterans' Institute
John Deere Building, P.O. Box 386
Timonium, MD 21093

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CJIE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the information provided or requested through Interlibrary Loan.

Bender, David L. VIETNAM WAR: OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS.
St. Paul, MN: Greenhaven Press, 1984.

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Dunn, Joe P. "Teaching the Vietnam War in High School." SOCIAL STUDIES 74 (September/October 1983): 198-200. EJ 288 888.

Dunn, Joe P. THE STATE OF THE FIELD: HOW VIETNAM IS BEING TAUGHT. Spartansburg, NC: Converse College, 1995.

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Gilbert, Marc Jason. THE VIETNAM WAR: TEACHING APPROACHES AND RESOURCES. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.

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Kutler, Stanley I., ed. THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE VIETNAM WAR. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996.

McCloud, Bill. WHAT SHOULD WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN ABOUT VIETNAM? Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989.

Meadows, Darrell. THE VIETNAM WAR: A FOUR-WEEK INSTRUCTIONAL UNIT—GRADES 11-12. St. Louis, MO: University of Missouri, 1990. ED 328 492.

Olsen, Karen, and John Low. VIETNAM IN THE CLASSROOM: FACT, FICTION, AND TRUTH. Baltimore, MD: Dundalk Community College, 1985. ED 265 912.

Starr, Jerold M., ed. THE LESSONS OF THE VIETNAM WAR: A MODULAR TEXTBOOK. Pittsburgh, PA: Center for Social Studies Education, 1988. ED 337 409.

Tollefson, James. "Conscientious Objection to the Vietnam War." OAH MAGAZINE OF HISTORY 8 (Spring 1994): 75-76. EJ 488 704.

Totten, Sam. "The Lessons of Vietnam." CURRICULUM REVIEW 25 (September/October 1985): 87-89. EJ 324 155.

VIETNAM: A TEACHER'S GUIDE. New York: The Asia Society, 1983.

THE VIETNAM ERA: A GUIDE TO TEACHING RESOURCES. Cambridge, MA: Indochina Curriculum Group, 1978.

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